

Whitchurch Civic Centre & Library Reinforced Autoclave Aerated Concrete (RAAC)

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1. Synopsis

The report provides information and recommendation for remediation options following the previous identification of RAAC at Whitchurch Civic Centre and closure of the main complex, following further feasibility assessment.

2. Executive Summary

2.1 Reinforced Autoclaved Aerated Concrete (RAAC) was discovered at Whitchurch Civic Centre Complex and Library during ongoing repair and maintenance activities leading to subsequent assessments. These detailed investigations have determined that the RAAC within the Civic and Library buildings is in critical condition. Consequently, as per the Cabinet decision dated Wednesday, 17th January 2024, the building has been decommissioned, secured, and closed.

- 2.2 The report provides an update on the actions taken to address issues related to the RAAC following the decision to decommission and close most of the complex for safety reasons. It outlines subsequent steps and recommendations based on further evaluations and work to date.
- 2.3 RAAC, a lightweight concrete, was used in UK construction from the 1950s to the 1980s for roofs, floors, cladding, and walls. Initially known for its durability, recent findings indicate more serious issues. The Local Government Association urges public authorities to urgently inspect buildings for RAAC components.
- 2.4 This report acknowledges that leaving the RAAC to remain in situ poses significant technical, financial, and public liability challenges due to its categorised critical condition, plus factors such as operational confidence. Therefore, this option is not considered viable. Options for mitigation by either replacing the structural roof or redeveloping the site have been evaluated through an initial outline feasibility assessment.

Following the Cabinet meeting on 17th January 2024, it was confirmed that due to significant issues, including the presence of RAAC, the Civic Centre is beyond economic repair. Authority was delegated to the Assistant Director of Commercial Services to:

- Decommission and permanently close the building.
- Establish a Working Group with Shropshire Council officers, local members, and Whitchurch Town Council to finalise the options appraisal for further approval by Cabinet/Council.
- Provide interim solutions for library and community services and develop business cases for future library and customer service transformations in Whitchurch.
- Collaborate with Whitchurch Town Council to find new civic accommodation.
- Consult with Whitchurch Town Council and the local community before final decisions on the site's future are made.

It is recognised the facility provided many public services from Library to Civic and Community functions and contributed to the **Healthy Economy** of a vibrant destination and local infrastructure. 2.5 Following the public consultation outcomes provided to the Working Group and initial outline feasibility assessment the preferred options in the remediation of the RAAC are as follows:

Option 1 – Replacement of the structural RAAC roof, consequential works, and priority capital condition improvements – circa £4m.

Following the outline feasibility and further initial survey assessments confirmed the potential for replacement of the structural RAAC roof together with priority condition improvements needed to provide longevity and compliance. Further detailed design would be required to inform formal procurement, statutory permissions, and construction delivery of approximately twenty-four months from the date of approval and funding.

Option 2 – Construction of a new replacement facility based on a needs assessment.

Following the outline feasibility and use of public consultation information it may be sustainable to consider constructing a new modern facility. Further detailed feasibility work will be required alongside a strategic needs analysis exercise to further inform the strategic requirements to be considered in a new facility. The estimated timescale to complete the detailed design, procurement, statutory permissions, and construction delivery, following the outcomes of the strategic needs assessment and agreed provision, would be anticipated at thirty-nine months from date of approval and confirmation of funding.

2.6 This report is seeking a decision to explore the above options for external central government funding and inclusion in Shropshire Council's Capital Strategy based on the outline estimated costs. It is noted that further detailed feasibility, design, and procurement would be required following confirmation of funding.

3. **Recommendations**

- 3.1 Based on the outline feasibility investigations and assessments, Cabinet agrees that the RAAC affected areas of the Civic building and Library continue to remain permanently closed due to it's critical condition and delegates the following: -
 - I. to the Executive Director of Resources to amend the capital strategy to reflect the revised implications set out within the report, to incorporate £4 million into the capital strategy to provide for the following
 - a. should central government funding or other external funding be secured this would form the Council's match funding (if required) for Option 2 construction of a new replacement facility based on the findings of a needs assessment.
 - should external funding not be secured then the proposed £4 million would be considered for Option 1 - replacement of the structural RAAC roof, consequential works, and priority capital condition improvements.
- II. To the Head of Property and Development to oversee appropriate funding bids and the production of a detailed strategic needs assessment and analysis to establish the

need of the people of Whitchurch for facilities at WCC so the future configuration of WCC is best suited to the needs of the town and its surrounding area.

Subject to recommendations in 3.1 i and ii and the successful confirmation of appropriate funds to bring a further report back to full Council with a final recommendation.

4. **Risk Assessment and Opportunities Appraisal**

 The current key risks have been identified and addressed in respect of the presence of RAAC and consideration of recommended options in the following Table 1 – Risks below.

Ref	Risk	Mitigation
1	Risk of failure and imminent collapse	Building propped and secured. Closed building to public. Chaperone system in place for access to the building for the tenants, stakeholders, and staff.
2	Loss of continuity of library provision in the market town	Whilst interim pop-up solutions for the library do not form part of this report, the recommendation assumes a permanent location for the Library in the Civic Centre is required.
3	Reputational damage.	Effective comms with stakeholders and members of the public. Liaison with Whitchurch Town Council and Library services has been undertaken
4	Public Response This proposal will be viewed purely in terms of the initial six options to help inform reducing the options. Variance of options will range from remedial work to the existing property to those preferring new facilities.	The responses from the Public Consultation were positive albeit a minority of respondents were dissatisfied and expressed concern for the closure of the property and loss of community functions. Further specialist consultation may be required to further confirm spatial, and facility needs in the Town i.e. consideration of two large areas such as the Theatre and Market Hall used for activities such as sports etc. given the new development of the Leisure Centre complex and its offer of services.
5	Loss of community facility provision through the closure of the civic centre	Needs analysis assessment and feasibility work required to inform.
6	Non RAAC condition-based priority items included within the retention of the building.	The inclusion of non RAAC condition priority items will help reduce long term operational maintenance capital and day to day revenue expenditure. Additionally, this would also improve areas of operational running costs through improved thermal improvement.
7	Increases in UK inflation and Construction Industry of materials and labour has increased costs threatening the financial affordability of the project and making accurate forecasting difficult.	UK Inflation has been high during the project feasibility stage, though rates have fallen in recent months to 1.7% (September CPI) from 2.2% (August CPI). This has resulted increased cost forecasting. Additionally, construction is anticipated to increase by 15% over the next five years, while tender prices will rise by 20% over the same period, according to the latest construction forecast data from BCIS (September 2024).
8	Scope Creep – Adding new features or conditions to the	The project should agree a fixed scope through the Council approval process. Strong change control and

	project will inevitably increase both the time and	project governance is required to avoid scope creep and should not vary without the appropriate
	cost of the project –	approvals. It is noted Option 1 does not include full
	threatening the Project	internal refurbishment or alteration to the existing layout. It only includes consequential damage from
	viability	the roof or elemental replacement.
9	Funding – The current Council's Capital Programme does not yet include the provision of Whitchurch Civic Centre & Library for major capital investment.	The proposal requires both Cabinet and Full Council decisions to be made on whether to proceed with Capital funding and approve the inclusion of the project in the Capital Programme. The Council should explore all means of external capital funding. Whilst central government funding is being provided to schools from the DfE and NHS etc. no central government funding has been identified to assist Local Government in corporate properties to date. Should funding not be available further consideration of the future site will need to be made as per
		recommendations.
10	Statutory Approval	The remedial works or rebuild of the property will require statutory approvals of Building Regulations and Planning Permission, with the property situated within a conservation area. The property is surrounded by multiple neighbouring properties with adjoining structures ranging from buildings, outhouses to garden walls. Consideration of legal notice and claims resulting from proposed works and or party wall notices being issued/agreed as required by the Party Wall Act (1996).
11	Construction Risks	Unknown hidden issues and risk. Constraint of site and buildability, impact to general neighbourhood during construction with noise, temporary road closures. Ensuring competent and financially resilient principal contractor.
12	Market Hall use during construction	Consideration will be required on the impact of any construction works if the Market Hall can remain open or is required to close. Impact on local traders and lease with Whitchurch Town Council will be required.

Table 1 – Risks

A further SWOT analysis of considerations can be found in Section 7 - Background.

The Recommendations within Section 3 would meet many of the priorities set out in the Shropshire Plan, most noticeably a **Health Economy** as per **Table 2 - Shropshire Plan - Meeting Priorities**.

Shropshire Plan – Priorities	Strategic Fit
Healthy People Support Shropshire residents to take responsibility for their own health and wellbeing, choosing healthy lifestyles and preventing ill- health, reducing the need for long- term or hospital care.	The proposal will continue to provide community facilities with help improve and maintain community wellbeing. This is provided through longevity of Library physical and online facilities through to the various community use of the Civic Centre for all ages and abilities.
 Healthy Economy Develop a vibrant destination that attracts people to live in, work in, learn in and visit. Deliver excellent connectivity and infrastructure, and increasing access to social contact, employment, education, services, and leisure opportunities. 	The reactivation of the Civic complex will aid attracting local footfall, in turn helping to support other local businesses with consequential trade. Creating a vibrant and sustained destination in maintaining local investment and new residents from local and surrounding locations.
Healthy Environment Reduce carbon footprint, including the adoption of low-carbon energy improvements and consumption for our assets and for communities. Provide a safe community facility reducing risk from harm.	The Civic Complex will have improved thermal performance through elemental upgrade to current standards which will aim to improve comfort levels and energy consumption. Opportunities are available to consider photovoltaic cells and air source heat pumps which will contribute to meeting local and national carbon reduction targets. The proposed will provide a safe facility, free from critical risk RAAC for local communities, visitors, and staff to access. Provision of an accessible and inclusive facility.
Healthy Organisation We will communicate clearly and transparently about what Shropshire Council delivers, signposting to the right places for services and support, and listen to what communities say about their place and what they need. We will put our resources in the right place using accurate data, insights and evidence to support the delivery of the organisation's priorities and balance the books.	The proposals to be informed through public consultation to aim to provide the right services in the right way, that residents need. Use of limited resources using data and evidenced information to inform proposals meeting the priorities of the organisation.

Table 2 - Shropshire Plan - Meeting Priorities

5. **Financial Implications**

- 5.1. Shropshire Council is currently managing an unprecedented financial position as budgeted for within the Medium-Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) approved by Council on 29 February 2024 and detailed monitoring position presented to Cabinet monthly. This demonstrates that significant management action is required over the remainder of the financial year to ensure the Council's financial survival. While all Cabinet Reports provide the financial implications of decisions being taken, this may change as officers review the overall financial situation and make decisions aligned to financial survivability. Where non-essential spend is identified within the Council, this will be reduced. This may involve:
 - scaling down initiatives,
 - changing the scope,
 - delaying implementation, or
 - extending delivery timescales.
- 5.2. Works undertaken regarding initial structural surveys and propping/mitigation to stabilise and secure the building to date have incurred costs of £109,917.
- 5.3. After further consideration of remedial options by the established Working Group, the two recommended options have been provided. Following the identification of feasibility funding this work has assisted in funding further outline surveys, assessments, and appraisals to further explore the constraints and opportunities of the site. This has informed the outline business case for further Cabinet approval of the feasibility recommendations.
- 5.4. The current budgets being drawn on to support the unplanned expenditure in terms of the MTFS are as follows:
 - i. Repairs and maintenance budget to respond to immediate propping and stabilisation work and associated surveys which have taken place to date reflective 5.2.
 - ii. Feasibility support fund for capital to fund feasibility work to inform the construction of a new facility or remediation options as set out in 5.3.
 - iii. The existing service budgets for libraries, together with transformation activity to support the strategic needs assessment for relocation to an alternative temporary premises is not included within this report and costs.
- 5.5 The financial considerations for the two different options are outlined in Section 7 under Table 3 High Level Estimated Costs and SWOT Analysis of Options 1 & 2, based on the findings from the RIBA Stage 2 feasibility appraisal. This includes an examination of the initial Capital Expenditure (CapEx) and the ongoing Operational Expenditure (OpEx). Both the short-term and long-term impacts on the Medium-Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) should be assessed to ensure sustainable property management.
- 5.6 This report sets out within the recommendations in section 3, that this project will be identified as a priority scheme within the capital strategy and the Council will look to

support external monies with appropriate match funding if required. No funding has yet been confirmed or identified with the Capital Programme and such funding to support the construction of a new development or remediation option could be supported either by capital receipts or borrowing. External funding remains the preferred option in terms of future financing of the recommendation. This could include consideration of appropriate funding sources which have not yet been identified or explored. Previous requests for additional Central Government funding in May 2024 were not successful.

It would be appropriate to set an agreed timescale to explore and secure external funding to prevent further deterioration of the site and mitigate current revenue holding costs. It would be proposed this be set at a reasonable period after which, further consideration be given to the alterative recommendation in Section 3.

6. Climate Change Appraisal

- 6.1. Retaining the existing building as per Option 1 to minimise the loss of embodied carbon within the existing structure should be considered. Additionally, limited thermal upgrades where needed, such as the RAAC roof, external window/door replacement, and remaining thermal efficiency improvements, are recommended. Due to consequential damage through the roof replacement to RAAC-affected areas, new replacement internal lighting will be LED energy-efficient to meet current Building Regulation standards through Approved Document L2A, thereby improving existing energy usage. Retention of the photovoltaic panels on the Market Hall should be considered to realise any current benefit from the established Feed-In Tariff and any existing grant funding liabilities placed on Whitchurch Town Council while preserving the use of the panels for their remaining life. Further opportunities to install photovoltaic panels and renewable energy capture on the south-facing replacement flat roofs would enhance carbon-reducing energy consumption. Additional consideration of low-carbon heating options for the facility can improve the complex's carbon footprint and energy consumption.
- 6.2. When considering the replacement of the building as per Option 2, it is important to evaluate the embedded carbon that would be displaced through demolition against the potential benefit of providing a new development meeting current standard. A new development, through compliance with Building Regulations, should reduce operational energy consumption and provide a modern, highly sustainable facility. It would be designed and built according to sustainable building principles, aiming to achieve the BREEAM 'Excellent' standard as per Shropshire Council policy. This would also involve quantifying and reporting the carbon performance of the project using a 'lifecycle carbon assessment' approach.

7. Background

- 7.1 Reinforced Autoclaved Aerated Concrete (RAAC) was widely used in the UK from the 1950s until 1982 due to durability issues. The SCOSS's 12th report in 1999 confirmed its 30-year life expectancy, indicating a short lifespan.
- 7.2 First created in Sweden in the 1920's as AAC, a lighter alternative to traditional concrete, steel reinforcement was introduced in the 1930's to provide larger structural panels building components. Whilst RAAC is a lightweight form of concrete. It is noted that: 'Although called "concrete", RAAC is very different from traditional concrete. This form of concrete is less dense with a lack of stone aggregate than traditional concrete.
- 7.3 Shropshire Council has been assessing the existing property asset portfolio to identify any presence of RAAC, following the emerging and urgent Department for Education (DfE), Local Government Association (LGA) and Government guidance. Whitchurch Civic Centre, including the Library and Registrar provision, has been identified as having RAAC roof structure construction, widely in the property.
- 7.4 After an initial identification and limited visual assessment, a more detailed inspection by a structural engineer determined that the RAAC installation is in poor condition (Red Critical as defined by the Institution of Structural Engineers). Immediate action requires temporary propping and closure of the building to all staff and visitors until permanent mitigations can be implemented.
- 7.5 The Library and Registrar Services operating from the building have been significantly impacted by the presence of RAAC in the complex and are currently closed. The Library Service have been operating a limited pop-up service from the Market Hall and is due to relocate to alternative temporary premises, whilst decisions are made on the next steps of the Civic complex.
- 7.6 The report in Appendix B provides the previous initial technical overview and options appraisal in consideration and to inform the medium to long-term options required to mitigate the RAAC installation and future of the property.
- 7.7 RAAC case studies have shown the Department of Education have committed to fund the removal of RAAC from schools, through grants or a School Rebuilding Programme. They have adopted a similar approach to the preferred option within this report, where it is uneconomic to repair government will step in to rebuild schools. However Local Government properties appear to not to be centrally funded for RAAC replacement.
- 7.8 Due to the nature of building and its civic uses further public consultation maybe required as part of the next stage of progressing the recommendations set out within this report. This is particularly pertinent should there be any further impact on library or civic services moving forward.

- 7.9 General consideration and discussion with Whitchurch Town Council has taken place in respect of the current partial closure of the building considering their position as the tenant of Shropshire Council. The Town Council have the benefit of a lease for nominal consideration to occupy the building. This lease was an interim arrangement and is capable of being terminated by either party with twelve months' notice. It would be Shropshire Council's consideration to serve notice to allow vacant possession to progress a preferred option once finalised. This would allow sufficient time for an alternative venue to be identified. In the immediate short-term limited use of the Market Hall element of the building can continue under a watching brief risk assessment, but ultimately this area would also be compromised in bringing forward a future option once finalised. Whitchurch Town Council have identified general alternative interim accommodation and are currently pursuing this to provide limited civic services.
- 7.10 Consultation with Local Members has taken place to keep them appraised of the position and the potential to undertake more detailed work with the aim of endorsing a final option. A summary of the key findings from the public consultation can be found below:
 - Essential Feature: Whitchurch Civic Centre was vital for both residents and nearby villagers before its partial closure due to RAAC discovery.
 - Community Engagement: 10% response rate indicates high community interest. Involvement included residents, community groups, officials, and businesses.
 - Preferred Option: Survey respondents favour replacing the structural roof and essential items among six provided options.
 - Popular Features: Library and market are most popular; used for concerts, events, and meetings.
 - Desire for Restoration and Improvement: Residents want all previous facilities returned with enhancements like better disabled access and more inclusive activities.
 - Public Sector Utilisation: Support for enhanced use by services such as driving test centres, NHS, or police.
 - Demographics: Reflects many town demographics but lacks young people's input. Suggestions include more youth activities.
 - Decreased Usage: Centre's partial closure reduced visits and library service use.
 - Impact on Businesses: Closure affects local businesses; call for quick restoration.
 - Cost Concerns: Requests for transparency about costs and clear communication from Shropshire Council.
 - Strong Desire for Restoration: Emphasised need for prompt facility restoration; centre seen as vital to the community.
 - Opportunity for Improvement: Respondents suggest ways to enhance the centre's vitality. Design plans should incorporate feedback and seek further insights.
 - Communication Imperative: Important that Shropshire Council communicates plans clearly and frequently, addressing concerns about investment and transparency.

See Appendix A for a full copy of the public consultation survey report.

7.11 Following clarification of the two preferred options to explore through further surveys to inform a feasibility assessment, a brief was provided to define the requirements, as below:

Option 1: Replacement of the structural RAAC roof, consequential works, and priority capital condition improvements. Progress a feasibility study to assess the potential for comprehensive repairs/replacement to the roof structure and other elements of the centre to address the inherent defects associated with RAAC and the ultimate findings of the Structural Survey. This will encompass a technical review of the required interventions, rectification and replacement elements required to address the condition items which currently prevent safe use of the asset together with any ancillary remediation associated with the major works. The feasibility will cover cost, value for money, deliverability, and potential timescale/programme. The cost estimate will be an estimate and include all appropriate preliminary items, professional fees, approvals, and temporary works.

Note: this option does not include any internal betterment or spatial alterations to improve the existing layout or function.

Option 2: Demolition and Rebuild (providing existing facilities)

Undertake a feasibility study encompassing the potential to demolish and re-provide civic amenities in line with the current provision encompassed in the existing building together with any other civic or community uses within the building (please refer to list of existing uses and uses identified within the consultation summary response July 2024.) The concept design can consider more efficient and modern interpretation of the spaces and requirements together with any additional civic or community uses. Provide a masterplan and concept design feasibility for a scheme together with an estimate of cost to RIBA stage 2.

Further SWOT analysis of the options can be found in Table 3 - High Level Estimated Costs and SWOT Analysis of Options 1 & 2.

Further details, floor plans, images and spatial concepts can be found in the supporting information within **Appendix C**.

A further high level SWOT analysis of the options can be found in Error! Reference source not found. below.

Option Name	Summary	Area Comments	Estimated Costs	(Main) Strength	(Main) Weakness	(Main) Opportunities
Option 1	Existing re-roof (with consequential works plus essential condition element improvement)	Existing floor areas, layout remain.	Overall estimated cost £4m RAAC replacement and consequential works £2.8m - £2.9m Plus, additional condition improvement works to be considered circa £750k. Option: Civic Hall roof Photovoltaic Panels, plus permanent edge protection circa additional £50k - £100k	 Minimises loss of embodied carbon in using existing structure. Main area's structure suitable for replacement structural roof system 	 Entrance, office, and library layout doesn't meet service requirements. Will not perform as well as new build. Some spaces underutilised. Property remains at energy efficiency level. Condition based CapEX and OpEX remain for the existing elements of the property 	 Familiarity of layout to staff and users. Lowest CapEX cost option Large area of flat roof to consider Photovoltaic Panels as part of design (tbc) utilising south facing open areas to reduce OpEx utility costs and lower carbon footprint.
Option 2 (A)	Construction new replacement facility Based on existing facilities to be replaced	Floor area similar as existing, but priced at new build rate	£8.5m - £9m	 All function retained. Library and office space better suited to current requirements 	 Highest CapEx Highest embodied carbon. 	 Lower OpEx cost. Improved emergency efficiency
Option 2 (B)	Construction of replacement facility but retain existing Market Hall	As 2A, minus the area of existing Market Hall	£6.7m - £7m	Balances new/retained options.	Existing Market hall fixes site layout and uses	Reduced OpEx cost
Option 2 (C)	Construction of replacement facility based on consolidated footprint/facilities	Smallest footprint of all options	£7.5m - £8m	 Frees up more of the site for external functions. Building size more suited to the mean utilisation. 	 Compromises on provision to reduce cost. 	Reduced OpEx cost than other rebuild options

Table 3 - High Level Estimated Costs and SWOT Analysis of Options 1 & 2

(Main) Threats

- Unknown hidden issues and risk.Constraint on site access and
- buildability impacting of efficiency of re-roof.
- Inherent general property defects remain unless addressed though capital condition improvement. Remains high OpEx costs for aging building, plant, and low energy efficiency energy
- Highest operational cost.
- Impact of demolition on services removed such as Gas Pipework, Market Hall gas blow air heaters.
- Party Wall (1996) legal considerations/claims
- Inclusion of Photovoltaic requiring cyclical OpEx inspection and fall arrest barrier protection
- Highest CapEx cost
- New facilities to Civic/Library and market Hall OpEx and function remain
- Loss of some functions may not be acceptable

8. Additional Information

- 8.1. Due consideration should be given to the strategic needs assessment for Whitchurch to inform a final option. Utilising the data and information from this assessment can help inform and align any future consultation around the future of any displaced services from the Civic Centre site to deliver place, need and demand led solutions with local engagement through the library and customer transformation programme.
- 8.2. Appendix A The Future of Whitchurch Civic Centre Public Consultation Survey Report July 2024.
- 8.3. Appendix B Technical Overview and Options Appraisal January 2024 (previously included as part of the January 2024 Information Pack).
- 8.4. Appendix C Presentation of Feasibility Options of RAAC Remediation & Rebuild Options.

9. Conclusions

9.1 Following the findings of outline initial feasibility in consideration of meeting the medium-term and long-term function of the property in providing safe public services, the viable options include mitigation to allow retention of the existing building by replacement of structural elements and associated remedial work, through to demolition and construction of a new facility. Based on the economic, social, and environmental factors and aligning to the Shropshire Plan, Climate Strategy, and buildability factors, it is recommended to consider the recommendations noted in Section 3, subject to confirmation of funding. The report is to inform of the democratic discussion and strategic decision in the future options of the property.

List of Background Papers (This MUST be completed for all reports, but does not include items containing exempt or confidential information)

(Public Pack) Agenda Document for Cabinet, 17/01/2024 10:30 Agenda Item 12 (p317) Decisions 17th-Jan-2024 10:30 Cabinet (p4)

Local Member:	Councillor - Peggy Mullock - Whitchurch North Councillor - Paul Wyn - Prees	
	Councillor - Thomas Biggins - Whitchurch North	
	Councillor - Gerald Dakin - Whitchurch North	

Appendices [Please list the titles of Appendices]

Appendix A - -Report July 2024.

Appendix B – Technical Overview and Options Appraisal January 2024 (previously included as part of the January 2024 Information Pack).

Appendix C – Presentation of Feasibility Options of RAAC Remediation & Rebuild Options January 2025.